

## BILL VIOLA

Bill Viola is acknowledged as one of the pioneers of video art, and he has been instrumental in establishing it as a viable medium for today's artists. This exhibition, the first comprehensive survey of his art, comprises early, highly experimental works and current works that clearly demonstrate Viola is a master of the form he helped to define.

A member of the first generation to grow up with television, Viola began experimenting with video in 1970 as an undergraduate in the College of Visual and Performing Arts at Syracuse University. As technology became more sophisticated, so did his art in all its forms, including single-monitor displays, pieces for presentation on multiple screens, video projections, and complete environments that envelop the viewer in a world of image, light, and sound. Today Viola uses the full range of technical advances, including digital imaging technologies, to create his spellbinding installations.

The mood of Viola's art, for all its visual spectacle, is contemplative, drawing upon such eclectic inspirations as classical philosophy, Zen Buddhism, Christian mysticism, Persian lyric poetry, and the distinctly American free verse of Walt Whitman. This range of sources suggests something of the scope and spiritual embrace of his art.

He may transfix the viewer with depictions of ordinary activities—women greeting each other in a plaza or children at a birthday party—rendered in extreme slow motion as an intense dreamlike drama; or he may surround us with a procession of disparate sights, sounds, and voices—a chick puncturing itself out of its egg, a human infant undergoing eye surgery, the wizened face of a woman on her deathbed. Whatever his strategy, Viola takes a humanistic approach to new media, using video to delve into the phenomenon of sensory perception as a language of the body and an avenue to self-knowledge. In a totally contemporary medium and manner he explores universal themes that have been the inspiration of artists working in many forms and in many traditions throughout history.

Viola's medium, as much as it is the video equipment and hardware of the trade, is consciousness itself; indeed, consciousness is his very subject. For Viola, the physical experience of the material world is indivisible from imaginative reflection and our understanding of the world. It is ultimately a kind of knowledge or wisdom that Viola aspires to manifest in his art and to share with his viewer.

Bill Viola was born in 1951 in New York City. In 1973 he received a bachelor of fine arts degree from the College of Visual and Performing Arts at Syracuse University. He has traveled to Java, Bali, the Solomon Islands, the Himalayas, and the Sahara Desert to produce his art, and he has been artist in residence at WNET Thirteen Television Laboratory in New York, Sony Corporation's Atsugi Laboratories in Japan, and the San Diego Zoo. Viola, who moved to California in 1981, has received numerous awards and honors, including the prestigious John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship (1985) and the Joan D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Award (1989). In 1995 Viola represented the United States at the Venice Biennale in Italy with a solo exhibition of five new installations. Today he lives in Long Beach with his wife and production manager, Kara Peioh, and their two children.

This exhibition of Bill Viola's art consists of sixteen installations in the galleries and twenty-two videotapes shown in the museum's Dorothy Collins Brown Auditorium (see schedule). The commentaries in this guide are extracted from the artist's writings.

# Videotapes

These works are screened in the Dorothy Collins Brown Auditorium, located on the lower level of the museum's Bing Center. Admission is free.

All videotapes are lent to the exhibition courtesy of the artist.



Portrait

### PROGRAM 1

Approximate running time, 45 min.  
**Tapé 1.** 1972, black-and-white, mono sound, 6:30 min.  
**Composition "D".** 1973, black-and-white, mono sound, 9:42 min.  
**Level.** 1973, black-and-white, mono sound, 8:24 min.  
**Cycles.** 1973, black-and-white, mono sound, 7:04 min.  
**In Version.** 1973, color, mono sound, 4:24 min.  
**Instant Breakfast.** 1974, color, mono sound, 5:05 min.  
**Offaction.** 1974, color, mono sound, 2:34 min.

### PROGRAM 2

Approximate running time, 46 min.  
**A Million Other Things (2).** 1975, color, mono sound, 4:35 min.  
**Return.** 1975, color, mono sound, 7:43 min.  
**Four Songs.** 1976, color, mono sound, 33:33 min.  
Comprises **Junkyard Levitation**, 3:11 min.,  
**Songs of Innocence**, 9:34 min.,  
**The Space Between the Teeth**, 9:10 min.,  
and **Truth Through Mass Individuation**, 10:59 min.

### PROGRAM 3

Approximate running time, 60 min.  
**Silent Life.** 1979, color, stereo sound, 13:14 min.  
**Ancient of Days.** 1979-81, color, stereo sound, 12:21 min.  
**Vegetable Memory.** 1978-80, color, mono sound, 15:13 min.  
**Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House.** 1983, black-and-white, stereo sound, 19:11 min.

### PROGRAM 4

Approximate running time, 57 min.  
**Chott el-Djerid (A Portrait in Light and Heat).** 1979, color, mono sound, 26 min.  
**Deserts.** music by Edgard Varèse, 1994, color, stereo sound, 26:09 min.

### PROGRAM 5

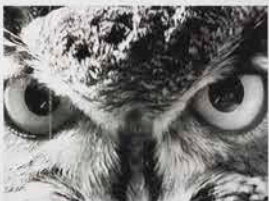
**Hatsu-Tume (First Dream).** 1981, color, stereo sound, 56 min.

### PROGRAM 6

**I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like.** 1986, color, stereo sound, 89 min.

### PROGRAM 7

**The Passing.** 1991, black-and-white, mono sound, 54 min.



I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like



Hatsu-Tume (First Dream)

It only takes an instant for an impression to become a vision.



The Passing

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\*Members' preview day



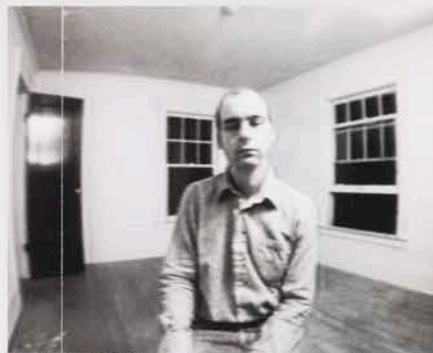
The Passing



The Crossing



Threshold



Nantes Triptych

Things are moving a lot slower than most people realize.



Hatsu-Tume (First Dream)

# Off-site



### Threshold, 1992

Video/sound installation  
Edition 2, collection of the artist; courtesy Anthony d'Offay Gallery, London

Current news scrolls across an electronic display sign with up-to-date reports on the daily events of the world. The illuminated text is harsh and bright. A black open doorway intersects the sign, dividing it in two and leading to a dark inner room. Inside this room three large, dim, black and white projections of people's faces while sleeping appear on the walls. The sound of regular breathing can be heard in the darkness. Occasionally one of the figures moves or shifts position but remains asleep, an unconscious presence existing beneath the incessant flow of worldly events.

Location to be determined.

### Nantes Triptych, 1992

Video/sound installation  
Edition 1: Fonds national d'art contemporain, Commande publique conçue pour le Musée des Beaux-Arts de Nantes, Ministère de la Culture, Paris, France

A central image of a man floating underwater fully clothed in a black pool is flanked on the left by an image of a young woman giving birth and, on the right, by an old woman on her deathbed. The three images together form a triptych based on the traditional Western altarpiece. The two side panels are documents of actual events. The central image is projected onto a translucent cloth screen stretched in front of an empty white room, forming an indistinct luminous cloud of light behind and beyond the surface of the image. The projected image of the body underwater hovers in midair, part material, part immaterial, held in fragile suspension before an indistinct, shadowy space between birth and death.

Presented at the Los Angeles Central Library  
The J. Paul Getty Trust Room  
630 West 5th Street, downtown

Hours  
Monday, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday, 10 a.m.-5:30 p.m.  
Tuesday and Wednesday, 12 noon-5 p.m.  
Sunday, 1-5 p.m.



### The Crossing, 1996

Video/sound installation  
Edition 1: The Bohen Foundation; promised gift to the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

The violent annihilation of a human figure by opposing natural forces of fire and water is projected simultaneously on two large screens. A man approaches from a long distance in slow motion. He finally stops and stands still. On one screen flames appear at his feet and quickly spread to consume his entire body. On the other screen water pours down from above, increasing until he becomes completely inundated. In the end the man is gone and only small flickering flames on a burnt floor remain in the one image, while a few lingering drops of water fall onto a soaked floor in the other. The two traditional natural elements of fire and water appear here not only in their destructive aspects but manifest their cathartic, purifying, and transformative capacities as well.

Location to be determined.

## KCET

will feature the art of Bill Viola on two Friday nights, November 7 and 14, at 11 p.m. Viola and theater director Peter Sellers will introduce the broadcast both evenings. Works scheduled are

Friday, November 7, 11 p.m.

Tapé 1, 1972, 6:50 min.

The Space Between the Teeth, 1976, 9:10 min.

The Reflecting Pool, 1977-79, 7 min.

Vegetable Memory, 1978-80, 15:13 min.

Anthem, 1983, 11:30 min.

Angel's Gate, 1989, 4:48 min.

Friday, November 14, 11 p.m.

The Passing, 1991, 54 min.



Vegetable Memory

## Conversation with Bill Viola and Peter Sellers

Wednesday, December 3, 1997, 7:30 p.m.  
Los Angeles Central Library  
Mark Taper Auditorium  
630 West 5th Street, downtown  
Free, but reservations are advised; please call (213) 228-7025.

## Conversation with Bill Viola, Peter Sellers, David A. Ross, and Howard N. Fox

Saturday, December 6, 1997, 1 p.m.  
Los Angeles County Museum of Art  
Leo S. Bing Theater  
Free for members and included in the general admission fee for nonmembers.

This exhibition was organized by the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

This exhibition is sponsored by VEBA.

Significant support was also provided by Peter and Eileen Norton and The Peter Norton Family Foundation, with additional funding from Pamela and Richard Kramlich, Marion Strout Swingle, Lynn Forester, Barbara Wise, and the National Committee of the Whitney Museum of American Art.

The Los Angeles presentation was made possible through the generous support of AT&T.

Education programs at the museum are supported in part by grants from the California Arts Council and the City of Los Angeles Cultural Affairs Department.

Los Angeles County Museum of Art  
5905 Wilshire Boulevard  
Los Angeles, California 90036

Museum Hours  
Monday, Tuesday, and Thursday, noon-8 p.m.  
Friday, noon-9 p.m.  
Saturday and Sunday, 11 a.m.-8 p.m.  
Closed Wednesday  
Call 213.857.6000 or visit our website at <http://www.lacma.org>.

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Front and back cover: The Crossing

Crazy Horse dreamed and went into the world where there is nothing but the spirits of all things. That is the real world that is behind this one, and everything we see here is something like a shadow from that world.

Black Elk

## Return Pass

Some works in this exhibition happen over a period of several hours, and it may not be possible to see all of the works in their entirety in one visit. Visitors who wish to spend additional time in the exhibition may request from the museum's ticket office a pass to return at a later date.

Wherever you are is the entry point.



# Installations

1  
**Slowly Turning Narrative**, 1992  
Video/sound installation  
Edition 2: Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Modern and Contemporary Art Council Fund

A large rotating screen shows a man's face in black and white on one side and a series of color images on the other. One side of the screen is mirrored, and it reflects the viewer's own image as well as the projected images, which travel across the walls of the room as the screen turns. A voice recites various states of being and actions in a continuous narrative chart. The entire space becomes an interior for the revelations of a constantly turning mind absorbed with itself.

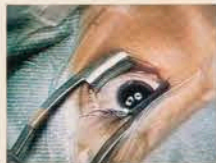


5  
**Room for St. John of the Cross**, 1983  
Video/sound installation  
The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; the El Paso Natural Gas Company Fund for California Art

Through a window in a black cuticle in a black room, a small color monitor on a wooden table is visible. The monitor displays a color image of a tranquil snow-covered mountain. A voice quietly recites the poems of the Spanish mystic St. John of the Cross can barely be heard from within. Outside, a large image projected on the wall shows black-and-white images of snow-covered mountains in constant wild, chaotic movement. A loud roaring sound fills the space like a storm. St. John's poems often describe love, ecstasy, flying, and passage through the dark night. They were written while he was held prisoner in a tiny windowless cell and tortured by the Inquisition for nine months in the year 1577.

6  
**Anthem**, 1983  
Video/sound installation  
Lent by the artist

A young girl in a white dress screams as she stands in the central hall of Union Station in Los Angeles. The original scream of a few seconds is extended and shifted in time to produce a primitive "scale" of tones that constitutes the sound track of the piece.



reveal their relation to our deep primal fears of illness, mortality, darkness, and the separation of the material body from its spiritual base.

7  
**Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House**, 1982  
Video/sound installation  
The Art Institute of Chicago; restricted gift of Barbara Bluhm; Mrs. Thomas H. Dittmer; Ruth Horwich; Susan and Lewis Marlow; Marcia and Irving Stern; Dr. and Mrs. Paul Sternberg; and Lynn and Allen Turner, through prior acquisitions of the Leigh and Mary Block Collection

A heavy wooden chair stands empty in front of a TV monitor. The monitor shows a man in close-up as he struggles to stay awake and alert. The room is silent. Headphones on the chair reveal his inner body sounds of breathing and swallowing, with multiple voices heard in the background engaged in stream-of-consciousness chatter. At random intervals, the man is struck violently from behind by an unseen figure, causing a loud explosion of sound to momentarily burst out from two loudspeakers in the room.

8  
**Heaven and Earth**, 1992  
Video installation  
Artist's proof; collection of the artist

Two wood columns extend from floor to ceiling, separated by a gap of several inches. At this gap, the exposed tubes of two black-and-white video monitors are positioned facing each other and not touching.



in a cycle of tension and release, as memory and experience constantly interact within the larger stream of the perpetual movement of individual consciousness.

9  
**The Reflecting Pool**, 1977-79  
Videotape  
Lent by the artist

A man emerges from a forest and stands before a pool of water. He leaps up, and time abruptly stands still. From this point, all movement and change in the otherwise still scene is limited to the reflections and undulations on the surface of the pool. Time becomes extended and punctuated by a series of events seen only as reflections in the water. The emergence of the individual into the natural environment becomes a baptism into a world of virtual images and indirect perceptions.



10  
**Passage**, 1987  
Video/sound installation  
Edition 1: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Accessions Committee Fund; gift of Mr. and Mrs. Donald G. Fisher, Susan and Robert Green, Pamela and Richard Kramlich, and Mr. and Mrs. Brooks Walker Jr.

A long narrow corridor leads to a small inner room where a large projection fills an entire wall. A videotape of a child's birthday party is being played back in extreme slow motion, taking seven hours to unfold. The room architecture places the viewer uncomfortably close to the image, and the deep rumbling sound of the slowed children's voices fills the space. An architectural structure enclosing time, the hallway and viewing room frame an image that transcends human scale in both time and space, placing the child's birthday party in the internal, subjective domain of ritual, memory, and emotive association.

11  
**The Veiling**, 1995  
Video/sound installation  
Edition 2: collection of the artist; courtesy Anthony d'Offay Gallery, London

Images of a man and a woman moving through a series of nocturnal landscapes are projected into parallel layers of loosely suspended translucent cloth. They each appear on separate opposing video channels and are seen gradually moving from dark areas of shadow into areas of bright light. The cloth material diffuses the light, and the figures dissipate in intensity and focus as they penetrate further into the screen layers, eventually intersecting each other on the central veil. Recorded independently, the images of the man and the woman never coexist in the same video frame. Only the light from their images intermingles in the fabric of the hanging veils.



12  
**The Sleepers**, 1992  
Video installation  
Edition 1: Musée d'Art Contemporain, Montreal

Seven metal barrels are filled to the brim with water. They each contain a black-and-white video monitor positioned on the bottom. Each monitor shows a recording of a person's face while asleep, presented with little or no editing. A different person appears in each barrel, and they remain isolated from each other on their individual screens beneath the water. The soft light from the video screens emerges from each barrel and diffuses in the room.



13  
**The Greeting**, 1996  
Video/sound installation  
Artist's proof 2: Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; partial and promised gift of an anonymous donor

An image sequence involving three women in an industrial urban landscape is projected onto a large screen mounted to the wall. Two women are engaged in conversation when they are interrupted by the arrival of a third woman. The new woman greets the older of the two, apparently her friend, and ignores the other. She whispers an urgent message in her friend's ear, further isolating the other woman. With an underlying awkwardness, introductions are made and pleasantries exchanged between the three. The action unfolds in extreme slow motion, allowing the nuance of every fleeting glance and gesture to become heightened and remain suspended in the viewer's conscious awareness.



14  
**Angel's Gate**, 1989  
Videotape  
Lent by the artist

A succession of individual images are punctuated by long, slow fades to black. The image sequences, including fruit falling from a tree, a candle being extinguished, a family having a flash photograph taken, appear as a series of openings of momentary glimpses into nature's essential gestures, which, like thoughts, are destined to fade and themselves disintegrate into obscurity and oblivion.



15  
**Tiny Deaths**, 1993  
Video/sound installation  
Edition 1: Musée d'Art Contemporain de Lyon, France

Three large projections appear on the walls of a completely dark room. They exist at the threshold of perception, barely visible in the darkness. Human forms gradually emerge as dim silhouettes on a field of noise. Quiet, indecipherable voices are heard by each image. At random intervals a light source slowly appears on one of the figures, increasing until the illumination rapidly accelerates to suddenly consume the whole body in a burst of saturated white light. The peak light momentarily illuminates the room and washes out the other two projections. All returns abruptly to darkness until one of the other projected figures moves through the same transformation.



16  
**Working Notes and Drawings**  
A selection of the artist's notebook entries and working drawings for his installations and videotapes from 1972 to 1996.



Where is the line of division  
Between this world and the land of Bliss?  
The eye is the line of division.  
SAICHI

Investigation of Black.  
A bright light on a dark day.  
The "black" in black and white  
The black sun—the luminous darkness.

No tongue can tell the artist to simply withdraw scientific observation and let Nature impress you with all her mystery and glory, with the vague, indiscernible emotions which tremble between wonder and sympathy.

Clarence King - late 1800's

Images in the darkness.  
Reflected light in the darkness might become the white image.  
Images will with noise - shimmering with grain.  
(Crystal images) like pristine records of light and shadow.

Reflection element - there can never actually be non-participating consciousness. The images in the camera scanning the landscape.

The visionary recital. The body sings... as the mind escapes.  
Insensations. The dead. The first words.

The breakdown of the optical image.  
Interiors with no optical geometry.

The human shape is a ghost  
made of distraction and pain.  
Sometimes pure light, sometimes cruel,  
trying wildly to open,  
this image tightly held within itself.

RJM

Tree installation:

In the middle of the sky's temple  
blooms a flower.  
Its petals are down  
and its roots are up.  
No filling, sowing or watering,  
no shoots or leaves—  
just a flower.

KRABIR



Map of the exhibition at the  
Los Angeles County Museum of Art

